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## **A vengeful education?**

### **Urban revanchism, sex work and the penal politics of John Schools**

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**ABSTRACT.** This article considers how useful the urban revanchism thesis is in helping us understand the John School, a “mobile” educational programme that has been rolled out in the United States, Canada, the UK and South Korea which teaches those arrested for soliciting for the purposes of buying sex the negative consequences of their actions. The article begins by unpacking the urban revanchism thesis and bringing it into dialogue with ideas on punishment. It then draws on a case study of one English John School in the anonymized town of Redtown. It demonstrates that the operations and rationales of the Redtown John School have traces of revanchism and that they are also infused by ideas and practices of care. As a result it argues that the urban revanchism thesis illuminates some important aspects of the Redtown John School while silencing or misreading others. The article concludes therefore by calling for future research to think more broadly about punishment (rather than revanchism) in the city and its entanglements with care.

*Keywords:* urban revanchism, John Schools, sex work, punishment, education, policy mobilities

## **Introduction**

A passerby would find it hard to imagine what unites these three dozen men, sitting nervously in a classroom on a recent overcast Saturday ... Black or white, rich or poor, recent immigrant or part of Washington’s elite – the main thing they have in common is that they are all men who have been busted for soliciting a prostitute. Or rather soliciting an undercover cop – an unfortunate mistake that led to their arrival here in the police training academy in Southeast Washington, next to the sewage treatment plant.

“Welcome to John School,” says a jovial man striding in front of a blackboard still covered with the chalky remains of a lesson in policing.

Rumbelow (2002, p. C1)

Since its inception in the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1981 a number of towns and cities across the United States such as Washington DC (above) have opened a John School. Named after the American colloquial term for a client who purchases sexual services, a John School is an educational programme that teaches those arrested for soliciting for the purposes of buying sex (henceforth soliciting) the negative consequences of their actions. By the end of 2007 John

Schools were operating in 39 localities in the United States where, in the vast majority of places, they are a “voluntary” diversion scheme available to those arrested for soliciting (Shivley *et al.* 2008). The other, more traditional option being a court appearance that can potentially result in a fine or in some cases imprisonment if found guilty. A small number of John Schools meanwhile have been set up as post-court sentencing options.

The John School has become a mobile policy (Peck and Theodore 2010; Temenos and McCann 2013), one that continues to circulate nationally as well as internationally, emerging in parts of Canada (since 1996), the United Kingdom (since 1998) and South Korea (since 2005). Alongside their expansion, they have appeared in the popular media regularly and been subject to academic scrutiny (Monto 1998; Campbell and Storr 2001; Fischer *et al.* 2002; Wortley *et al.* 2002; Gibbs Van Bruschot 2003; Kennedy *et al.* 2004; Sanders 2008; Shivley *et al.* 2008; Lovell and Jordan 2012; Gurd and O’Brien 2013; Majic 2014; Cook forthcoming). The academic literature has provided a number of useful and critical insights. Two stand out. First, the literature reveals the gendered messages in, and gendered politics behind, John Schools, issues that we will return to. Second, despite the low “reoffending rates” that supporters of John Schools frequently tout, the literature questions the ability of John Schools to significantly change the attitudes of attendees and reduce their reoffending long-term (cf. Shivley *et al.* 2008; Lovell and Jordan 2012). This work, however, has made very few connections to the growing body of work on the interface between policing the city and urban redevelopment (e.g. Mitchell 2003; Helms and Atkinson 2007), or the related work on urban revanchism (e.g. Smith 1996; Hubbard 2004a).

It is this undeveloped and potentially fruitful link between John Schools and urban revanchism that this article will critically explore. The concept of urban revanchism, or the revanchist city as it is otherwise known, was coined by the late Neil Smith (1954–2012). At its core the urban revanchism thesis argues that in recent decades, urban regimes across the world have sought, via a number of punitive measures, to *take back* the city from those “undeserving” and marginalized groups who have “stolen” it from its wealthier “rightful owners” (see Smith 1996, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2009).

In his evocative and thought-provoking work, Smith identifies a familiar set of targets of urban revanchism. His often-quoted list encompasses ‘minorities, the working class, homeless people, the unemployed, women, gays and lesbians, immigrants’ (Smith 1996, p. 207). Sex workers are also occasionally mentioned as targets by Smith but their clients are never linked to the wider process of urban revanchism, despite the increasing criminalization of soliciting in places like the UK and North America, as well as the small but growing numbers of countries

who have criminalized the buying of sex (notably Sweden, Norway and Iceland). Hubbard's (2004a) work seeks to extend Smith's work on urban revanchism by examining how sex workers are caught up in a gendered urban revanchism but the clients of sex workers are not focused on.

The focus of the article will therefore be on the emergence of John Schools in England, focusing on one John School in the anonymized town of Redtown, and whether or not the urban revanchism thesis can help us make sense of it. The context of this article is useful as there has been little empirical study of contemporary John Schools in the UK (although see Campbell and Storr 2001; Sanders 2008, 2009). Furthermore, the British context – away from the John School's birthplace in the United States – will speak to a particular debate on urban revanchism: does it take place everywhere and in the same way (see DeVerteuil *et al.* 2009)? The focus on John Schools and the clients of sex workers, moreover, will also test the conceptual dexterity of urban revanchism, seeing whether it can be “stretched” to make sense of John Schools. It is hoped that this article on urban revanchism will act in *some small way* like Neil Smith as Joe Doherty (2013, p. 3) remembers him: ‘deliver[ing] robust critiques whenever necessary, but always in a spirit of support, respect, and passionate debate to make a better theory’.

Empirically the article will draw on a research project examining the politics and practice of the John School in Redtown. Methodologically, the project involved a triangulation of qualitative data, notably documentary analysis of relevant policy documents and newspaper articles, participant observation at one session, and semi-structured interviews with members of the police, council and outreach services who operate, and work alongside, the John School in Redtown. The participant observation and interviews took place between December 2011 and January 2012. The interview transcripts, observation notes and documents examined were then analysed and coded, participants and places were anonymized, and key themes drawn out and critically examined.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere I have explored the ways in which particular ideas around gender, sex work and victimisation have influenced the politics and pedagogies of the Redtown John School (see Cook forthcoming). Here the focus is on exploring whether urban revanchism can help make sense of the John School. As such, the article will be structured as follows. The next section will examine the emergence, extensions and critiques of urban revanchism. In so doing, it will consider what Smith means by revanchism and its implicit links to wider ideas around punishment. After this the article will move on to examine the rationales and practices of the John School in Redtown. This article will demonstrate four things. First, it shows that urban revanchism can be more clearly understood as a form of punishment underpinned by a mixture of retributive and

consequentialist logics. Second, that the operations and rationales of the John School have elements of revanchism that work alongside ideas and practices of care. Third, it argues that the urban revanchism thesis captures some important aspects of the Redtown John School while silencing or misreading others. Fourth and finally, that future research should not focus so narrowly on urban revanchism but rather on punishment in the city more broadly and its entanglements with care.

### **Unpacking urban revanchism**

*The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, written by Neil Smith, was published in 1996. It demonstrated, as Tom Slater (2012, p. 543) notes, ‘the author’s seething anger at what was happening to the poorest residents of the city where he lived’. The city was New York. The monograph focused on the emergence and evolution of gentrification and revanchism in New York and detailed how similar processes were operating in cities such as Philadelphia, Budapest and Amsterdam. It quickly became a seminal text within geography and urban studies, stimulating a whole raft of critical research into gentrification, homelessness, and the links between urban redevelopment and policing.

Here and in subsequent articles (Smith 1998, 2001, 2002, 2009), Smith reasons that urban revanchism is a politics of revenge. *Revanche*, he notes, is the French word for revenge. Revanchism, as highlighted earlier, is about the taking back of the city. It is the act of avenging those who have ‘stolen New York from a white middle class that sees the city as its birthright’ (Smith 1998, p. 1). In “post-liberal” New York, Smith highlights a range of revanchist strategies, many of which were orchestrated by Rudolph Giuliani (who was Mayor between 1994–2001). These included “zero tolerance” policing within public space, associated police brutality and abuse, high levels of incarceration, termination of contracts for some providers of homeless shelters, the removal of the homeless from public space, state-sponsored gentrification, the shrinking and marketization of welfare services for marginalised groups, and cutbacks imposed on the City University of New York.

New York was neither the beginning nor the end of urban revanchism according to Smith. He argues that its origins lie in 19th Century France where ‘a reactionary, nationalist movement [sought ...] revenge against the perceived liberalism of the Second Empire and the proletarian uprising of the Paris Commune’ (Smith 2001, p. 69). For Smith, this spirit of revenge was resurrected in the post-liberal era of the late 20th Century. Furthermore, Smith (1996, p. 44) argues that contemporary ‘urban revanchism ... is a much more widespread experience’ than

New York City alone. As a result, a number of studies have critically analysed the materialities and discourses of urban revanchism in different parts of the world such as Glasgow (MacLeod 2002), Guangzhou (Huang *et al.* 2014), Rotterdam (Uitermark and Duyvendak 2008; van Eijk 2010), and the cities of Quito and Guayaquil in Ecuador (Swanson 2007).

It is curious that none of the commentaries on urban revanchism have explored in depth what Smith means by the word revenge, beyond highlighting the links to the 19th Century revanchist movement in France. Perhaps this is because Smith never explicitly defines the term. In order to understand the nuances of urban revanchism, I argue here that it should be understood as a form of punishment. While punishment is sometimes viewed as the opposite of revenge – with the former seen as being forward-looking and justified and the latter often viewed as reactionary, excessively cruel and unjust – I believe that this is a false binary and that punishment can include the aforementioned traits of revenge (Zaibert 2006; cf. Schumann and Ross 2010). Drawing on Flew (1954) and Benn and Peters (1959), we can therefore define punishment as involving an evil or an unpleasantness to the (actual or supposed) offender, conducted with special authority from the institution(s) whose laws or rules have been broken. Important within this is that the pain or unpleasantness involved in the punishment is for the most part intended and not merely a coincidental or accidental outcome. I argue that urban revanchism embodies these characteristics of punishment.

Framing urban revanchism as punishment, therefore, allows us to read between the lines and see how urban revanchism is based on a particular mutation and blend of two schools of reasoning for punishment: retributivism and consequentialism (see Hudson 2003 and Cavadino *et al.* 2013 for excellent critical overviews of retributivism and consequentialism). Urban revanchism is retributive in the sense that it is *backwards-looking*: it is about people being punished in direct response to their past crimes and misdemeanours (i.e. marginalized groups are punished for their “crime” of taking the city). As Smith (1996, p. 43) states, it is ‘revengeful and reactionary’.

It is also consequentialist in that it is often *forwards-looking*: it punishes people for what might happen in the future. Unlike most consequential thinking on punishment – which seeks to avoid future crimes and reoffending – a central goal of urban revanchism is to avoid further declines in capital accumulation and inward investment. Here the targets of urban revanchism are framed as barriers to local economic development as their presence may discourage people from visiting, living and investing in the area (see also Mitchell 2003; Helms and Atkinson 2007; Cook and Whowell 2011). As Smith (1998, p. 3) notes, ‘[s]anitizing the urban landscape’ is viewed as

necessary under urban revanchism in order to ‘reverse the urban decline, opening up the possibility of a new city on the hill’.

With faint and distorted echoes of Jeremy Bentham’s notion of utilitarianism, urban revanchist discourse demands the disproportionate punishment of particular groups in society such as the homeless and low-level “deviants” because it is deemed to result in a “greater good”: capital accumulation. Although it is debatable whether capital accumulation (a) will happen, (b) is a greater good, or (c) as Bentham sought, a greater good for the greatest number. Punishment through urban revanchism, therefore, is a means to an end, not an end in itself as Kantian forms of retributive punishment demands (Hudson 2003).

Smith’s revanchist city thesis, of course, has not remained static. Other scholars have sought to extend the conceptual lens of the revanchist city. Hubbard (2004a, p. 665), for example, argues that the revanchist city thesis needs to be amended in light of the fact that ‘some of the forms of revenge currently being exacted on prostitute women in Western cities ... serve both capital and the phallus’. In saying this, Hubbard argues that punitive policing against sex workers in London and Paris is not only about reviving capital accumulation and gentrification under neo-liberalism but also about ‘the re-inscription of patriarchal relations in the urban landscape’ (Hubbard 2004a, p. 666; see also Hubbard 2004b). Here Hubbard’s expansion of the revanchist city framework contrasts with Papayanis’ (2000) more conservative adoption of the original capital-centric revanchist city framework to understand the attempts to remove sex shops from Manhattan at the end of the 20th Century.

Together with the work of Don Mitchell (2001, 2003) and Mike Davis (1990), Smith’s account of the homeless within *The New Urban Frontier* has been highly influential in setting the agenda for homelessness research in human geography and urban studies. Nevertheless, a number of recent studies have questioned the merit and influence of these radical and somewhat dystopian accounts of homelessness (see DeVerteuil 2006, 2014; DeVerteuil *et al.* 2009; Murphy 2009; Cloke *et al.* 2010; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick 2010; Thörn 2011). Such critiques are useful to consider here because they point to perceived flaws in the revanchist city thesis. DeVerteuil *et al.* (2009), for instance, have been critical of its broad-brush approach. They argue that the thesis incorrectly frames the “local state” as a singular entity with the solitary aim of capital accumulation. DeVerteuil *et al.* also note that the thesis focuses excessively on the punitive policing of “street homeless” in public space, paying little or no attention to the “hidden homeless” (e.g. “sofa-surfers”) or the practices of negotiation and resistance by the homeless (see also Huang *et al.* 2014). Added to this, they pose two further questions, which we will now



examine in more depth: does revanchism operate everywhere and in the same way? And is revanchism accompanied by “softer” strategies of policing and welfare?

The question of whether the urban revanchism model has relevance outside of New York City has been widely debated. Smith (1998, p. 8) has argued that ‘[t]he new urban revanchism may be best developed but it is by no means restricted to New York City’. In his last paper on the subject entitled ‘Revanchist planet’, Smith (2009, p. 11) goes further by arguing that the “war on terror” is revanchist, underpinned by ‘revenge and reaction’. Others tend to shy away from presenting urban revanchism as an all-pervasive process. MacLeod’s (2002, p. 626) account of urban entrepreneurialism in Glasgow, for instance, reasons that while the revanchist city framework ‘offers a deeply suggestive heuristic with which to reassess the changing geographical contours of a city’s restless urban landscape’, ‘Glasgow’s revanchism [is ...] minor-league in comparison to the perspective’s “home base” of New York’ (p. 603). The notion of revanchism in Europe being softer than in (parts of) the United States is echoed elsewhere (Aalbers 2011; Thörn 2011). Using case studies of gentrification in the Bijlmer district of Amsterdam (Aalbers 2011), “anti-segregation” policies in Rotterdam (Uitermark and Duyvendak 2008) and policies towards begging, rough sleeping and street drinking in England (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick 2010), others have argued that urban revanchism is not always solely orientated towards the desires and fears of the middle and upper-classes but can receive support from, and possibly even benefit, the working classes. Such points echo the insights of the policy mobilities literature which show that models and ideas *mutate* as they are moved between places and re-embedded into new social, economic and political contexts (Peck and Theodore 2010; Swanson 2013; Temenos and McCann 2013).

An increasingly common-place argument in the literature is that revanchist policies run alongside and are often dependent on a number of ‘softer’ strategies of exclusion, containment, help and support for marginalised groups (see Aalbers 2011; Cloke *et al.* 2010; DeVerteuil 2014; DeVerteuil *et al.* 2009; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick 2010; Thörn 2011). Cloke *et al.* (2010), for example, show how a network of state and voluntary services – from soup kitchens to hostels – are available for homeless in the UK whose *raison d’être* bears little resemblance to the urban revanchism agenda and their *modus operandi* is not revanchist. Feelings and expressions of compassion and care, they argue, have not been, and cannot be, explored in the revanchist city thesis. These points echo a critique on the language of “punitiveness” in criminology by Roger Matthews (2005) that has implications for those in geography and urban studies as many continue to use punitivism as a pseudonym for revanchism (and *vice versa*). Matthews (2005, p. 175) argues that although criminologists tend to portray a ‘surge in punitiveness’ in contemporary society, the

concept of punitiveness is rarely defined. If we take this term to mean some form of excess, disproportionality and retribution in punishment, he argues, ‘many commentators on social control tend to play down the ‘non-punitive’ developments within penal policy’ (p. 180) and when they do, they tend to misrepresent it as a bifurcated “twin-track” penal justice system. Penalty, for Matthews, is more complex than these accounts suggests. It is important, therefore, that studies of urban revanchism avoid such traps.

With these underpinnings, extensions and criticisms of urban revanchism in mind, it is now time to examine John Schools in depth, before returning to the question of whether urban revanchism can help us make sense of them.

### **Opening John School**

Nine years prior to the opening of the John School in Redtown in 2007, the first British John School emerged in the city of Leeds (Campbell and Storr 2001). The Kerb Crawling Rehabilitation Programme, as it was known, operated for less than two years, closing due to waning support from the local police (*Yorkshire Evening Post* 2000). Despite its short lifespan, it did stimulate interest in the John School model elsewhere in England. Up until the end of 2012, 15 more John Schools opened in different urban areas including Bristol, Middlesbrough, Nottingham, Southampton and Tower Hamlets in London. Echoing the Leeds programme, all operate as court-diversion programmes for those arrested for soliciting for the first time. John Schools are therefore important technologies in the policing and punishment of “inappropriate” sexual practices in the UK. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that their geographical coverage remains relatively small; no John Schools exist at the time of writing in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland with most police forces in England not using the programme. Such an uneven landscape of John School adoption reflects the lack of statutory status for John Schools as well as the relative autonomy that police forces have in the UK (Raco 2003).

Echoing Cochrane’s (2011) observation that urban politics is not simply politics *within* the city, the emergence of John Schools in selected English towns and cities has been shaped by a number of processes operating at different scales. Indeed, their adoption of John Schools has been facilitated and shaped by the increasing criminalization of clients across England and Wales (Sanders 2008, 2009). Prior to 1985, sex workers were the focus of law and order in England and Wales, while clients – with a very small number of exceptions – were not subject to arrest or legal proceedings. However, a number of Acts of Parliament were enacted that sought to punish those attempting to buy sex. This began with the Sexual Offences Act (1985) that made kerb crawling

illegal in England and Wales. Kerb crawling was defined in the Act in gender-specific terms as a man soliciting a woman for the purposes of prostitution from, or within the vicinity, of a motor vehicle. It would only be a criminal offence if, as the Act states, it were conducted ‘in such manner or in such circumstances as to be likely to cause annoyance to the woman (or any of the women) solicited, or nuisance to other persons in the neighbourhood’. It also needed to be “persistent” (with persistent as well as annoyance and nuisance never defined).

Since then the punishment has become more severe as those convicted of kerb crawling can be disqualified from driving (from 2000) and it became an arrestable offence (from 2001). Furthermore, to use Cohen’s (1979) infamous term, there has been a “net-widening” under the Policing and Crime Act (2009) whereby the necessity for police to prove persistence was dropped and it became a strict-liability offence to buy sex from a person subject to force, threats, coercion or deception from a third party. Also important to note is that all prostitution-related offences became “gender-neutral” following the Sexual Offences Act (2003) and that kerb crawling was subsumed within the new offence of soliciting under the Policing and Crime Act (2009). When viewed as a whole, the Acts individually and collectively stop short of fully criminalizing the buying of sex in all circumstances *à la* Sweden. Furthermore, unlike Sweden where clients have *replaced* sex workers as the central targets of prostitution penal policy, in England and Wales clients have become criminalized under certain circumstances *alongside* sex workers (Brooks-Gordon 2010; Sanders 2012). In Scotland and Northern Ireland, which will not be focused on in this article, clients have also become increasingly criminalized clients alongside sex workers. What is more, at time of writing Northern Ireland looks set to emulate Sweden after its Assembly voted to criminalize the buying of sex in October 2014.

Behind the repositioning of the client as an offender, Sanders (2008) argues, are three multi-scalar processes. First is the emergence of a transnational radical feminist movement that want to abolish prostitution. Within this scholars and activists such as Barry (1995) and Jeffreys (1997) view prostitution as being premised on the objectivizing and commodification of women’s bodies by men as well as male domination over women. This, they argue, makes it an inherent form of gendered violence with “prostituted women” – as Jeffreys (1997) prefers to call sex workers – frequently subject to coercion, rape, violence and abuse by men. While such a viewpoint has been widely criticized (see, e.g., Weitzer 2012), it has nonetheless become influential in some policymaking circles most noticeably in Sweden, Norway and Iceland but also to a limited degree in the UK (Kantola and Squires 2004; Scoular 2004). Second, there have been a number of instances of localized antipathy towards and activism against sex workers by residents living in areas where sex work – particularly street sex work – is prevalent. Here, sex

workers and kerb crawlers are perceived as being a public nuisance and a threat to the quality of life in the neighbourhood (Hubbard 1998, 1999; Kantola and Squires 2004; Laing and Cook 2014). Third, Sanders (2008, p. 136) argues that conservative groups have shifted their attention ‘away from gay sexuality as “deviant” to other sexualities and behaviours as a target for moralizing’ with kerb crawlers increasingly focused on. All of the three processes identified by Sanders (2008) have influenced the policing of sex work and kerb crawling in Redtown in recent years. Yet, as we shall see, residential antipathy towards, and activism against, sex work and kerb crawling has been particularly influential, leading to the establishment of the John School and a long-running policing campaign against kerb crawling in Redtown.

To explore this further it is useful to highlight the urban geographies of sex work in the town. Redtown is a mid-sized and largely working class town that has experienced significant deindustrialization. Amid this two industrial estates adjacent to the town centre have operated informally as red light districts for many years, with indoor sex work taking place in a small number of brothels and houses in various parts of the town. While indoor sex work has received little collective contestation, the location and presence of outdoor sex work in and around the red light districts have been subject to disapproval and contestation. This has not stemmed so much from businesses in the area but from residents who live in a predominately working class neighbourhood – anonymized here as Northside – that sits adjacent to one of the red light districts. The residents’ objections have focused on the presence of sex work in the red light districts, its proximity to their neighbourhood and “boundary crossing” of sex work into the residential area.

These tensions echo struggles between sex workers and residents elsewhere where sex work is framed as being out-of-place (Cresswell 1996) or, going further, ‘a polluting influence’ in and around residential neighbourhoods (Hubbard 1998, p. 283). The grievances in Northside were also compounded by a widespread belief among residents that the police had effectively created “tolerance zones” in the industrial estates which in turn encourage sex work to operate “by their doorstep”. These tensions, which peaked in the mid-2000s, manifested themselves in continued complaints about sex workers and kerb crawlers to the council, the police and the letters page of the local newspaper (often by a small number of individuals). The concerns of the residents are also reflected in a petition, featuring over 2,000 signatures and demanding a zero tolerance approach to policing kerb crawling in Redtown, which was presented to the police, council and Home Office during 2006.

In many ways the actions and views of the residents are forms of NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard-ism) as it is the proximity of sex work to the residential area that is the primary concern rather than, say, concerns about the safety of sex worker. Likewise as with forms of NIMBYism, the remedy is to spatially exclude the problem in order to purify their neighbourhood (Hubbard 1998; see also DeVerteuil 2013). Nevertheless, such community oppression has stemmed from a number of genuine concerns, namely men and women being solicited by sex workers or kerb crawlers, the potential for children to view sexual acts or touch detritus of sex work, and a belief that sex work brings associated problems of drugs and crime to the area (cf. O'Neill *et al.* 2008; Pitcher *et al.* 2008). These concerns were also been focused on by the local newspaper who frequently ran front-page headlines, editorials and articles about the “problem” of sex work in the district.

Alongside community pressure there has been the desire by council élites to redevelop the town centre and the industrial estates on its periphery as these have suffered from disinvestment over several decades. While provisional plans for the wholesale regeneration for both red light districts have made little progress, there has been a longstanding belief from council élites that the presence of sex work in the districts and their reputation as red light districts makes them look and feel unsafe, harming their reputation, and discouraging firms from investing there. In particular, there have been concerns that the practices of sex work – which occur largely during the evening and night – discourage firms that operate beyond and outside of typical “day-time” opening hours from locating in the area. So when a chain hotel did open up in one of the districts during 2011, the police and council officials interviewed reasoned that efforts to reduce sex work in the area must continue in order to comfort those using and travelling to and from the hotel at various hours.

In addition to the pressures from Northside residents and the regeneration desires of council élites, the decision to start up a John School was also influenced by a change in direction in the way outdoor sex work would be policed in the town. Following a number of staff changes in the neighbourhood policing team, a consensus emerged that the existing approach to policing street sex work – namely the unspoken allowance of tolerance zones together with periodic ‘crackdowns’ – was sending out mixed signals about the ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ of engaging in street sex work. Furthermore, there was a belief that although the tolerance zones separated most sex work from residents, the numbers of sex workers in the town was not diminishing. This was increasingly problematic because sex workers were beginning to be viewed as victims – often of abuse, drug dependencies and chaotic lifestyles – as well as (public nuisance) offenders. The

police and council in Redtown believed that the best form of assistance that could be given to sex workers was encouraging them to exit sex work.

A desire for women to exit sex work was also shared by an outreach organization that has worked with sex workers in Redtown for over a decade. Staffed by full-time and voluntary staff, it has provided support services for sex workers and other vulnerable groups in the town. The outreach organization has operated under a non-discriminatory Christian ethos but share a radical feminist viewpoint that prostitution is an exploitative system from which sex workers needed to be exited (outreach officials #1 and #2, interview; see also Oselin and Weitzer 2013). The drive towards exiting in Redtown reflects the New Labour Government's Coordinated Prostitution Strategy (Home Office 2006) that sought to exit sex workers through a coercive mixture of legal and welfare measures. The most noticeable of these being Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) which often involves banning sex workers from operating in particular places for a set period of time and Engagement and Support Orders which emerged under the Policing and Crime Act 2009, and require sex workers to attend three meetings with a "named supervisor" to plan their exit from prostitution (Sanders 2012). In Redtown the named supervisor is a member of the outreach organization.

The Redtown John School was devised by a small group of élites at the council, police and the outreach team. Those involved agreed that exiting sex workers was necessary but also believed this could be supported, or fast-tracked, by "tackling" the demand for street sex work (Cook forthcoming). If you reduce the demand, so the logic goes, you will reduce the supply. What is more, stopping the demand was seen as being easier than halting the supply as clients were viewed as being less dependent on sex work than sex workers (cf. Sanders 2008). Importantly, however, addressing the demand for indoor sex work was not seen as a priority with those interviewed arguing that indoor sex work received few complaints from residents and those working indoor had better working conditions than their outdoor counterparts (cf. Sanders 2005; Prior *et al.* 2013). The new approach, therefore, had a particular urban geography; focusing firmly on the outdoor spaces in and around Redtown's red light districts.

A pivotal factor in the introduction of the John School to Redtown was the perception that John Schools had been successful elsewhere. While the officials interviewed in Redtown noted that they did not study existing John Schools elsewhere in depth when developing their own version, they were aware of the basic "nuts and bolts" of the model, the rationales often cited for its use, and its seeming ability to deliver low reoffending rates for those attending. Indeed, the message that kerb crawlers who have attended John Schools rarely kerb crawl again

has been widely circulated in police and media circles in the UK, North America and beyond (see, e.g., Thompson 2005; Harris 2008). While there are indeed significant problems with the way that reoffending is measured – for instance, it ignores those who have gone on to solicit without being arrested and those who commit other types of illicit or illegal activities afterwards (Sanders 2008) – the stated reoffending rates have helped position the John School as a best practice model (Moore 2013) which can address the demand for street sex work. Not only was it viewed as a *successful* policy model elsewhere, it was also seen as a *transferable* policy model (Cook 2008), one that was relatively inexpensive to organize and did not require wholesale changes to the ways in which the police, courts and related bodies operated.

Thus far we have seen that the John School in Redtown emerged as one of several technologies designed to tackle the problem of prostitution. Street sex work – and kerb crawling in particular – became social and spatial problems in multiple ways: problems of territoriality and proximity (for Northside residents), investment problems (for council élites), and problems of exploitation and dependency (according to the council, police and outreach organization). The problems and their “solutions” have been framed locally but heavily influenced by extra-local guidance and models of best practice. As this section has shown, in attempting to “fix” these problems, the governance of street sex work and kerb crawling has intensified in Redtown; the John School emerged alongside the removal of the tolerance zones, regular surveillance of the red light districts, the issuing of ASBOs and Engagement and Support Orders, and the development of dedicated support services for sex workers. Like the John School, most of these focus on “help through hassle” and many display revanchist traits – such as the focus on marginalized groups and the punitive restrictions they place on the freedom and mobility of sex workers and kerb crawlers. Nevertheless, many of these technologies are neither exclusively punitive nor are they solely a response to middle class concerns about economic development. The John School in Redtown, in short, has not opened amid a sea of exclusively revanchist technologies. Nonetheless, it is useful to look inside the John School to consider whether its operations have revanchist tendencies.

### **Inside John School**

Since the opening of its John School in 2007, the vast majority of men who have been caught soliciting in Redtown have opted to attend a designated session at the main police station (rather than attending court). Each session typically lasts between one and two hours with each attendee receiving a police caution at the end of the session. As with John Schools across England, those

registered must attend one session and no aftercare is provided. By the end of 2011, 20 sessions had taken place in Redtown attended by an average of 20 “students”. All of whom have been men and according to those interviewed the attendees have come from a variety of class and ethnic backgrounds.

The Redtown John School does not have an official name. It is often referred to as an “awareness session”, a name which implies an educational format. Yet it is a particular type of didactic education at the John School which focuses on showing the “harms” and “victims” that kerb crawling creates and perpetuates (Cook forthcoming). For one police official interviewed (#1), an educational approach is necessary as it provides ‘an opportunity to sit down with those people and explain a different reality of street prostitution’. Sending a client to court, he argued, provides the accused with limited or abstract reasons why they were being punished, with this poor communication doing little to deter the client from reoffending. At the John School, clients are perceived as making a conscious but ill-informed choice to solicit for and buy sex. Following the lessons learnt at the John School they can, therefore, make a conscious and well-informed decision *not* to solicit for or buy sex (Majic 2014). Educating clients at John School, to put it another way, is seen as a way of encouraging them to take responsibility for both their actions and the consequences of their actions. The realization of these, it is believed, will make the clients ‘think twice before doing it again’ (outreach official #1, interview).

Echoing John Schools elsewhere, stress is placed on “revealing” the multiple and often hidden forms of victimization that clients are responsible for (cf. Fischer *et al.* 2002; Gurd and O’Brien 2013; Majic 2014). To demonstrate this, each session involves presentations from four speakers: a police representative, a community safety manager and a social worker from the council, and a representative of the outreach organization. The presentations talk about how the sex workers and Northside residents are victimized by kerb crawlers and that kerb crawlers also become victims – or rather, victims of their own making – when they are arrested by the police. Here those in attendance are warned of the consequences of being caught again and that they are able to prevent further victimization if they “act responsibly”. Lining up the harms and victims involved in prostitution, for one interviewee, is necessary to dispel the ‘myth’ that it ‘is just a simple business transaction, it doesn’t affect anyone else, that they are almost doing this woman a favour’ (police official #1). The presentations, therefore, have clear resonances with radical feminist understandings of sex work (as being inherently abusive and exploitative) and territorial understandings of sex work (as being out-of-place in residential neighbourhoods).



The educational emphasis at the Redtown John School echoes its counterparts elsewhere in two respects. First, the stories told are somewhat extreme, of exploitation and violence towards vulnerable sex workers whose experiences are universalised and presented as the norm (Majic 2014). The residential community meanwhile are portrayed as being vehemently and uniformly anti-sex work (overlooking the fact that some sex workers and clients live in Northside). Second, the education in Redtown is not only about the harms and consequences of not only soliciting but also buying sex, the latter being a practice that remains legal providing the sex worker is not subject to force, threats, coercion or deception from a third party (Sanders 2009). The acts of soliciting and buying become intertwined during the John School presentations with both framed as being anti-social and morally wrong. The use of John Schools to moralize on a legal activity, therefore, clearly jars with the notion of proportionality in punishment.

As the Redtown John School takes an educational format, it would be easy to conclude that it ‘symbolizes a non-punitive “second chance” for first-time offenders by providing an opportunity to avoid criminal justice proceedings and related consequences’ (Fischer *et al.* 2002, p. 396). While I believe this is a short-sighted assessment – as do Fischer *et al.* in the case of the Toronto John School – there are certainly some aspects about the Redtown John School that are not cruel and excessive. For instance, each session is a maximum of two hours (so attendees can more easily attend without suspicion arising); the attendance list is not publicly listed; and no letters are sent or telephone calls made to the home address or workplace about the arrest or School (in case a family member, friend or colleague intercepts or overhears). Furthermore, and unlike John Schools elsewhere, the Redtown John School does not require attendees to pay an admission fee, to wear name badges, to remove hats or sunglasses (often used to conceal their identity), or to engage in (potentially) demeaning role-play activities. Indeed, one police official interviewed (#2) reasoned:

we are not in the business of ruining people’s lives. They need to get that serious message. It doesn’t need to ruin their life, does it? I don’t need to go and tell someone’s wife that they have been kerb-crawling. There is no need to do that. They need the education and ... an hour or so is long enough because they can get away for an hour.

Such elements could imply that the John School is a “soft option”. This is a criticism that those governing the scheme frequently contest and one that jars with my experience observing a session in Redtown where many of those attending appeared to be struggling with discomfort,

embarrassment and shame. Attending the session has serious consequences as one police official interviewed (#1) noted:

It is not a soft option; it means that they have got a police record, we have taken their fingerprints, we have got their photograph, their DNA, they have got to disclose their caution in certain circumstances, so it can effect travel, can effect employment, can effect education ...

Individuals are not singled out for shaming at the Redtown John School. Instead, shaming is usually more implicit and collectivized. At the session I attended, the speakers often placed the blame for the victims and harms highlighted on all those who have kerb crawled in Redtown, while occasionally the kerb crawlers in attendance (as a group) were highlighted as being the ones responsible. Shaming, however, becomes individualized and explicit at the Redtown John School when the police representative holds up the front page of the local newspaper at every session. Its lead story and accompanying photograph focuses on the court appearance of the first person to have reoffended after attending a John School session. He warns those attending not to re-offend otherwise he will speak to the local newspaper before their court appearance to encourage them to report on it. In short, they will be named and shamed, a practice that has been used on and off by public bodies and newspapers in the UK for a number of crimes and misdemeanours including paedophilia, looting and tax avoidance.

The increased severity of the punishment for reoffending here echoes the current laws on soliciting and loitering for the purposes of selling sex in England and Wales where a sex worker will receive a “prostitutes’ caution” if caught but if they are caught a second time within three months they are arrested and potentially fined or issued with an Engagement and Support Order. The rising severity of the punishment for the clients, meanwhile, was backed by all interviewees. For instance, the police official (#2) who stated earlier that ‘we are not in the business of ruining people’s lives’ later detailed in the interview that:

[Naming and shaming] will ruin some people’s lives. But that said, they have been told, they have been given a warning ... If we go and educate people and they still choose to do wrong, then they have got to take responsibility.

There was a sense that the increased severity matched the culpability of the offenders. In this sense, it reflects a strand of retributive thinking that argues that the severity of punishment should be based not only on the offender's involvement in the crime in question but also on his or her involvement in prior offending (Roberts 2008). It also embodies consequentialist logic where naming and shaming should deter those attending the John School sessions as well as those reading the newspaper elsewhere. On top of this, it could be seen as a way for the police and council to publicly demonstrate that they are "doing something" about the concerns of the public.

However, as Sanders (2009) notes, in many cases it is not simply the offender who suffers from naming and shaming as it can also cause severely upset and stigmatise family members and partners as well. Likewise, there is also a strong argument that John Schools have negative consequences for sex workers. Indeed, the police operations that "feed" the John School in Redtown not only involve arresting the kerb crawler but also issuing the sex worker with a caution or arresting them (which could result in a fine or an Engagement and Support Order). For Campbell and Storr (2001) these operations are also potentially dangerous as they could force sex workers into unsafe working practices such as working in more isolated, unfamiliar and unsafe areas to avoid police surveillance and arrest, and negotiating with clients as quickly as possible, limiting their abilities to identify potential dangerous clients. Such ramifications seem to contradict a central goal of many John Schools: to reduce harm and victimization.

## **Conclusion**

This article has considered the emergence and circulation of both a policy model – the John School – and a theoretical framework – urban revanchism. Despite their widespread use in different parts of the world, John Schools and the urban revanchism framework have not been brought together in academic debates. In light of this, the introduction to this article asked whether or not the urban revanchism thesis can help us make sense of John Schools. Let us conclude this article by returning to this question. To summarize, urban revanchism is about the taking back of the city from marginalized groups who have "stolen" it from its (wealthier) "rightful owners". It is justified through retributive, backwards-looking discourse asserting the need for revenge and reaction, as well as consequentialist forward-looking discourse demanding that offenders are punished severely and disproportionately because such punishment will help restore capital accumulation in the city.

In the case study of the Redtown John School, a number of the core tenets of urban revanchism are visible. First we can see that sex work was framed as a territorial problem: sex work “taking over” two industrial areas and “polluting” a nearby residential area. The NIMBY-like impulse here was to remove sex work from the area restoring it back to “normal use”. Second, the opening of the Redtown John School and the associated intensification of policing operations are influenced by a desire to restore capital accumulation in an economically depressed area. Third, we can see that elements of the John School and the wider policing operations are punitive in the sense that they are disproportionate to the actions in question and at times cruel – think for instance of the naming and shaming as well as the desire to educate clients about the wrongs of buying sex when it is not illegal providing the sex worker is not subject to force, threats, coercion or deception from a third party. Furthermore, the John School is targeted solely and therefore disproportionately at those soliciting *outdoors* for the purposes of buying sex (while ignoring those soliciting indoors).

Nevertheless, we can also see aspects in the Redtown John School that run contrary to the urban revanchism thesis. First, it was not solely fears over the economic fortunes of the town that led to the development of the John School. This clearly played a part but it was one of several concerns, including the place of street sex work nearby and in a residential area and the victimization of sex workers in prostitution. Second and echoing the findings of other studies (Uitermark and Duyvendak 2008; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick 2010; Aalbers 2011), the case study shows that the middle and upper classes were neither the most vocal nor were they the intended primary beneficiaries of revanchist actions as Smith suggests. While there was a desire to improve the look and feel of the industrial estates for investors, it is arguably the concerns of a number of residents living in the working class area of Northside and the perceived needs of often poverty-stricken sex workers that were most influential. Third, following on from the above, the middle and upper classes are not immune from being the targets of punishment as the clients arrested are from a variety of social classes. Fourth, the more punitive elements in the Redtown John School are accompanied by softer elements such as the relative privacy in the punishment and the diversion away from a court appearance. Revanchism clearly does not operate in the Redtown John School in, what Uitermark and Duyvendak (2008, p. 1485) term, its ‘purest form’.

Indeed, other imperatives and practices seem to run alongside revanchism in the Redtown John School. One of these, perhaps surprisingly, is care. Such an observation, of course, echoes emerging work that examines how revanchist strategies operate alongside, and are sometimes dependent on, practices and spaces of care (see, e.g., Cloke *et al.* 2010; Conradson 2011; DeVerteuil 2014). As well as being a space of punishment, the John School in Redtown is also a

space of care. The care offered by the governors of the sessions, however, is not directed to those inside the makeshift classroom, but to those outside – most noticeably the residents of Northside and the street sex workers. The didactic education implores the attendees to show empathy, compassion and respect towards sex workers and residents through abstaining from soliciting for and purchasing sex. It can also be argued that the John School operates in large part because of concerns about, and a desire to improve, the lives of these two groups. Such concern and help in the case of the street sex workers is of course complicated by, and contradicted, by their punishment and the “coercive care” involved in Engagement and Support Orders (Scoular and O’Neill 2007). What is perhaps most important here, and what has yet to be explored in the literature on the geographies of care, is the demonstration of care towards particular groups (sex workers and residents) through the punishment of others (kerb crawlers). Care here has clear echoes of utilitarianism and is far from unproblematic.

In making an assessment on the strength and suitability of the urban revanchism thesis, it is important to reiterate that this is the study of *one* John School in England. Mobile policies, as the policy mobilities literature notes, mutate as they move (Peck and Theodore 2010; Temenos and McCann 2013). Therefore the intensity and form of revanchism (as well as care) is likely to vary from one John School to another. It would therefore be problematic to state that all John Schools embody the same rationales and practices as the Redtown case study. What this case study does show, however, is that the urban revanchism thesis illuminates some important aspects of the John School in Redtown while silencing or misreading others. This would suggest that the thesis cannot be universally applied to all John Schools.

More broadly, urban scholarship needs to rely less on the urban revanchism thesis in understanding punishment in the city. Instead, it needs to be open to punishment and its multiplicities; the contingent and multi-scalar forms of punishment, its aims and repercussions (some of which may be revanchist), and its interactions and entanglements with care. The urban revanchism thesis can be useful in some instances so a complete disregarding of the urban revanchism is ill-advised. Nevertheless, it is important to proceed with a more open and flexible approach for making sense of punishment in the city.

On top of this, more research on John School is needed. Here, future research must explore the relationship between punishment, care and other imperatives/practices in John Schools in different parts of the world. Such research should also critically examine how John Schools are experienced by those attending and how attendance influences their lives, attitudes and relationships afterwards. Moreover, research is also needed into the displaying of care for

some through the punishment of others, not just at John Schools but also in other areas of social life.

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<sup>1</sup> I was granted access to interview those running the John School and observe a session on the condition that the organizations and people involved were anonymized. On the grounds of ethical responsibility and gaining access I agreed to the request. I was open about my identity throughout the research. For example, at the start of the session attended I was introduced to everyone attending by the police official leading the session (stating my name, job title and institution) but I was never told the identity of the clients attending. Although I did converse with some of the clients their comments remain confidential.